

# Missouri Strategic Initiative for Economic Growth

By Dr. Norm Ridder, Superintendent, Springfield Public Schools

**Challenge:** *Losing the connection between families, communities and public schools threatens workforce development and social fabric.*

For generations, public schools have been at the center of Missouri's towns and cities. That connection gave parents, businesses and all citizens a direct, personal investment in the outcomes as graduates took the reins of business and citizenship.

The centrality of public schools to a community and its role in the local and regional economy is now threatened by one-size-fits-all accountability demands created far beyond local communities. At the same time, an increased emphasis on summative assessments smothers the needed focus on differentiated instruction and teaching workforce skills and college readiness in an economy that demands innovation and adaptability.

## **Making accountability count**

Public schools have willingly embraced accountability, as they should; parents and the entire state have a vested interest in the outcome. The downside to the push for accountability is that too often those demands have been created by those too far removed from the day-to-day realities of education, and too often those accountability measures have factored local communities out of the equation.

Current legislative mandates have forced schools to rely on a single standardized assessment conducted once a year as their primary measure of accountability. It creates a two-fold problem for community schools. First, by limiting accountability to summative assessments, i.e. one-size-fits-all test scores, it misses the opportunity to take a wider-ranging examination of a child's ability and his or her school's academic progress. This approach to assessment ignores the fact that students arrive at school with vastly different circumstances in their lives that impact their readiness to learn.

The second problem with this approach is that schools are narrowly judged as either passing or failing as they work to meet arbitrarily moving annual assessment targets. Such a narrow accounting of a school fails to factor in additional challenges faced, progress being made and other important achievements positively impacting students and families.

The result is a widening disconnect between communities and schools that threatens the development of a workforce able to thrive in the new economy. This is happening at a time when parents and business are demanding more rigor and more opportunities for students.

## **Documenting the need for academic rigor and innovation**

In the spring of 2010, representatives from Springfield Public Schools conducted an extensive research project with parents using a qualitative method known as human

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centered design. (Requiring extensive personal interviews with a wide variety of customers, HCD is used by businesses such as Proctor and Gamble to guide product development. The Gates Foundation recently made this technique available to nonprofit organizations seeking to improve service delivery). The results of the study revealed significant concerns about public schools and a growing sense that the institution was not well equipped to meet the evolving needs of families and communities.

A common theme expressed throughout the research was that summative, standardized assessments were leading to a significant decline in academic rigor and student engagement.

“Children have a natural joy of learning, but it feels like we ‘drill and kill’ it out of them in preparing for testing,” said one set of parents interviewed.

“I feel like we teach to the middle,” said the mother of a middle school student.

Parents who have the means will increasingly look to private and parochial schools to meet their demands and expectations. As the viability of online options for education continues to grow, the doors will open for even more families will leave public schools. Harvard’s Clayton Christensen, an expert on the process of disruptive innovation, described this phenomenon in his 2008 book “Disrupting Class.”

This information mirrors trends exposed in national research. A 2007 survey by the American Society for Quality found that 49 percent of adults do not think that K-12 schools are effectively teaching kids communication skills such as listening and speaking. Almost half, 48 percent, felt that schools were not effectively teaching problem-solving and creativity, e.g. the ability to find innovative solutions to everyday problems. It should be pointed out that those areas are not measured significantly on a typical state assessment.

If middle class families choose to leave and businesses are not satisfied with the product, there will be an erosion of support for public schools and an increased unwillingness to fund those institutions. That would result schools ill prepared to develop students to succeed in the workforce or make the informed decisions required by a participatory democracy.

There is a way forward that will satisfy the demand for more engaging community schools that ready students for success in tomorrow’s workforce while at the same time meeting the accountability measures determined by legislative fiat.

### **Making education a unique experience**

Following the input of a community-wide strategic planning process during the 2006-2007 school year, Springfield Public Schools’ strategic plan, SP5, was launched in August 2007. Through the process of stakeholder input it was determined that programs

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related to workforce development, science and math, and more programs with academic rigor in general, were top priorities for the majority of our key stakeholder groups.

Key findings from the 2006-2007 input process revealed that 50 percent of our teachers would prefer to teach in a specialized or focused program and that around 25 percent of our current parental population would prefer these types of programs as well. A survey of Springfield parents conducted in May 2010 revealed that more than 47 percent said they would like to see additional specialized or focused programs offered by the district.

Since that time, several specialized programs have been created or expanded by the district, and the results have been very encouraging. Two examples include:

Wonders of the Ozarks Learning Facility (WOLF) allows fifth-grade students to spend considerable time learning in the outdoors. Students are taught the same core curriculum as other fifth-graders, but all subjects are taught in the context of nature and conservation education. Any district fourth-grade student with satisfactory attendance and behavior can apply.

End-of-year assessments conducted using the Performance Series test revealed that WOLF students scored an average of more than 200 points higher in reading and more than 150 points higher in math compared to other fifth grade students.

Another example of a focused program is Middle College, a partnership between Springfield Public Schools and Ozarks Technical Community College. This program provides a contemporary, academic pathway for Springfield Public Schools students to earn a high school diploma and college credits while developing career and technical skills to facilitate a seamless transition to the workforce or post-secondary education. It serves underperforming students that are perceived to have greater academic abilities but for an array of internal or external reasons are not reaching their potential.

For the initial graduating class, the average high school GPA upon entering the program was 1.68, the average college GPA for the first graduating was 2.71. Of the 20 students comprising the first graduating class, 6 made the President's and Dean's Lists. Both community support and student demand for the program have grown significantly in just two years.

### **Building a better assessment**

Another important part of the solution to this challenge is changing the nature of assessments used in the evaluation of public schools and students.

Administered once a year, high stakes tests like the MAP take a one-time snapshot of student progress. Teachers receive the results of those tests months after students have been promoted to the next grade level. That means the results are of little use to teachers in trying to develop differentiated instructional strategies designed to reach various types of learners in the academic areas where they struggle.

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A better assessment tool would allow teachers and staff to gauge student performance throughout the year with readily available results that allow them to better identify the needs of individual students.

Springfield Public Schools began using the Performance Series online assessment system on a limited basis in the 2008-2009 school year. The Performance Series is administered in the beginning, middle and end of the school year. It is designed for students in grades 3-8 to test reading, language arts, and math, using the same reporting measurements as the MAP. Real-time results can be viewed at the content area, content standard, or objective level.

Students become engaged in their learning when they get immediate feedback on their performance. Both staff and students find that the performance series gives them immediate feedback on their assessments and helps them recognize the next steps to mastering the subject. Already, the progress is evident. (Scores are available in SPS' [fourth quarter report](#).)

### **The way forward**

Missouri has an opportunity to be a national leader in the effort to make schools more rigorous and responsive to the needs of local communities and national economic challenges.

In order to achieve that, the state must shift more of the burden of accountability onto local communities, incorporating their input in determining goals and establishing outcomes for public schools. Furthermore, the state must do more to support innovation in public schools by identifying successful practices and programs that work, even outside the definition of NCLB measures, and supporting the growth of such efforts through education funding.

Missouri should also initiate an effort to examine how we can expand the continuum of education, from birth through college graduation. That effort should begin with support for families to promote healthy development in nurturing environments for infants and toddlers. Support for preschool programs for all families, particularly working and middle class families, would ensure children start kindergarten on solid footing.

Finally, testing must be made more useful for schools and students and better incorporate 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

It is a challenging road to be sure, but it is one that will position Missouri as an economic leader in a complex, evolving economy.